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#10 Tom answers Personal Qs on favourite preachers, authors and his own faith

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Listeners want to know about Tom - Who are his favourite authors? If he could have dinner with anyone from the 20th Century who would it be? Why is he an Anglican? Has he ever struggled with his own faith?

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Transcript

[Music] Premiere Podcast.

[Music]

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello Hello welcome along to episode 10.

Yes believe it or not episode 10 already of the Ask NT Wright anything podcast. I'm Justin Braley sitting down with Tom Wright every fortnight to ask your questions. The show brought to you of course by Premiere in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online.

We really do appreciate it when you rate and review the show wherever you get your podcasts from over on the Podbean podcast app. There have been quite a few lovely comments left. Pastor Don Plank said this is a wonderful source of not only information but encouragement along the way.

Others said thanks so much. I learned so much with each podcast. Another says fantastic podcast really needed this.

Other comments very thoughtful and balanced. Thank you. Great podcast.

And this person says it is wonderful to be able to turn to someone who has the learning, the experience and the faith to speak about the great issues and meanings of life. Thank you. A great comfort and an exciting challenge.

Well I know Tom will be blushing to hear those kinds of comments read out but he's a very glad that the show is reaching so many people and is a cause of encouragement for them. Today Tom will be blushing more because he's going to be tackling questions about himself. Yes lots of you have questions about Tom about what he gets up to, what his big influences are.

Today we'll be looking at things like his favorite authors, why he's an Anglican and whether he's ever struggled with his own faith as well. So those are some of the questions we're doing on a personal edition of the podcast today. If you want more episodes, updates or want to ask a question yourself for a future programme do register over at askNTY right dot com.

And if you register now you get access to bonus video content. We've just released a video actually of Tom talking about popular Canadian psychologist Jordan B. Peterson. So if you want to see what Tom has to say about him go to the website and check it out in the video section.

And it's not too late to enter the prize draw for one of those three signed copies of Tom's translation of scripture, the Bible for everyone. It's a hefty old book. Tom signed three of them for podcast listeners.

He's translated the whole of the New Testament, John Golden A has done the Old Testament. Just sign up to the newsletter and you'll be automatically put in the hat for the prize draw. And of course you get the bonus content, the newsletter.

And of course get to ask a question if you want to go and sign up at askNTY right dot com. Welcome to today's podcast. It is the fortnightly catch up with Tom Wright with me Justin Briley.

It's great to have you in studio again, Tom. And today we've brought together a number of questions that came in around yourself. So I know you're a very humble person.

You don't like talking about yourself all that much, but people do want to know about Tom Wright himself. So are you okay with that? Sure. Yes.

Yes. Yes. I have a friend who's writing a book on humility and we tease him that it's

going to be called humility and how I achieved it.

Let me go actually to a question I was going to leave to the end, but actually I think I'll ask you at the beginning. Jim in Davis, California says, are you planning to write your autobiography or memoir? Well, my publishers have muttered to me that a theological autobiography might be fun because I happened to have been, as it were, a guilty bystander in major shifts in the study of Jesus and Paul and various other things as well and resurrection and new creation. And so I've found that on the odd occasions I mentioned how I came into all that in lectures and so on.

People are actually quite interested in that. So it may be that that will happen sooner or later. I doubt if a real autobiographical memoir would work.

The trouble is that there's a huge temptation to settle old scores and that does not read well. Yes. Yes.

Of course I'm an real old story. It's a write of biography of Paul, you know, 2000 years later. For people who are still with us, that's slightly different.

Well, yes. One person that they mentioned actually Jim specifically says, I'm especially interested in reading about your time at Oxford with George Caird. I'm afraid the name doesn't mean a lot to me.

George Caird who died sadly young. He was younger when he died than I am now. He was 67 and just about Trata.

He was the principal of Mansfield College. He was a great nonconformist preacher, lecturer, theologian, basically a biblical scholar, been a pupil of CHDOD among others. He was from Scottish Shroots originally from the Dundee area.

There is a Caird hall in Dundee, not named after him, but it's a famous name up there. George was a brilliant classicist who studied in Cambridge, then came to Oxford to do his theology and then did a doctorate. And he did doctorate on glory in the New Testament, a wonderful piece of work which has never been published.

There were aiming now to get it published at last. And he ran Mansfield College. He preached widely.

He lectured. He was a brilliant New Testament lecturer and he would come in, sweep into the room, one of the Greek Testament will be on the thing. And as Henry Chadwick once said, it's probably upside down because he knew it by heart anyway.

And it was a theatrical performance. And we'd be sitting there absolutely spellbound. And then he'd finished the lecture, snap the book shut and shush out of the door.

And no surprise is one of his sons. This is one of the most famous theatre directors of our

time, John Cadd, who was one of the producers for Les Mers and all that. But he, four children, another of whom was a concerto boest, I mean a very, very talented family.

And George was my supervisor all through my doctoral thesis. So the second half of the 1970s, I would go in fear and trembling to him every few weeks with something I'd written. And he would say, well, now there's very interesting, I'm not sure I agree with it, but let's have a cup of tea and we'll talk about it.

Off we go. And I think we both changed our views, but probably me more than him, certainly me more than him. But what I'm most grateful to him for was the historical approach, which then came up particularly in his famous book, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, which is one of those life saving books, which actually explains what apocalyptic language is all about.

When the Bible says the sun and the moon will be darkened and the stars will be falling from heaven, this is not a weather forecast. That this is language about empires and great power games going on. George understood that he was a Hebrewist.

He translated some of the apocrypha for the New English Bible. I mean, he knew those texts intimately and knew how they worked and would slice through the nonsense that was going on in scholarship. So he's a great role model and I was privileged to co-edit a volume of essays in his memory after he died.

But how much we wished he'd lived to have them presented him. Just keep on the theme of people who have influenced you, Paul in California, asks who have been the top two or three preachers that you have loved to listen to on a regular or semi-regular basis? One of the funny things about being ordained, and then particularly being a bishop, is that wherever you go, you're doing the preaching. So for years, I haven't actually listened regularly to very many preachers.

The church I go to now has had a succession of different clergy in the years that I've been going there, including along into regnant where we would just get different people so I haven't been regularly going to one person. Can I say, I would be terrified of being the minister of the church that Tom writes attends? Fortunately, it's a tiny church. The church I attend is not much bigger than this space we're in here and there's congregation about 20.

And there's another retired theological professor also in the congregation, Stuart Hall, who's a precious expeller. That will be the reason to be terrified. But the church wardens and people always tell visiting professors, you know, these two are harmless, they won't bite.

Because I mean, it's a very serious point. When I go to church on Sunday, I'm an ordinary Christian needing to hear that God is God of grace and he is for me and Jesus and please

come and that I'm welcome to despite everything. I need that just as much as everyone else, possibly more.

If my wife is here, she'd certainly be more. So that's where we are. However, when I was young, I was very fortunate in Oxford to hear Keith Weston, who died not that many years ago.

KAA Weston was retriptions and ebbs church. Keith is a wonderful preacher, a warm-hearted good speaker. He'd done his homework.

He loved exegesis. He got us to open the Bibles, but not in a dry, wooden way, brought it to life week after week. I also was privileged to hear some Bible expositions and I used to get tapes of them from Alec Mater, who was at one stage principal of Trinity College Bristol, an Old Testament scholar.

And Alec opened the Old Testament. He once did a series of Bible readings in Cambridge on the whole of the Book of Isaiah in, I think, six or seven hour-long lectures, which opened my eyes to ways of seeing the whole flow of Scripture, which I've always been grateful for and always tried myself to reproduce. I did hear John Start and Dick Lucas and people like that when I was young, great preachers with their own particular styles, but always with that sense of the detailed attention to the text.

The text is the text is the text. We're not just using it as a springboard to jump off into fairyland. But then, nor is it just a mathematical exercise, it's got to translate out.

And so that's what I learned from them and I'm really, really grateful for them. Are we just sticking with the idea of you sitting in an average church congregation and listening and being able to be fed yourself? I mean, do you have to sort of turn down the academic in you in order to receive, in a sense, the spiritual side of that? Yes and no. One never knows.

I mean, part of the joy of listening to a sermon in the context of a worship service is that the words may be comparatively trivial, comparatively, yes, that's the sort of thing that the average preacher would say. But when it's hedged about with Psalms and hymns and Bible readings and when you're coming to the Lord's table in and through it all, even ordinary words can mean more than they mean by themselves. Preaching is funny like that.

And yes, for me it's no trouble because the academic bit of me is the academic bit of me but the person I am is an ordinary Christian who reads the Bible every day and tries to hear what God is saying. I seem to remember some words from C.S. Lewis that I can't quote exactly but I can't remember exactly where they were either but where he talked about the importance of as Christians, he'd mean obviously a brilliant Christian thinker but sitting next to the charwoman I think was the kind of church and accepting that God

is just as much present in that service for her as he is for the great academic. Absolutely.

And one of the negative blessings of having been an academic for half of my working life when I was in Oxford and then in now in St Andrews is that certainly let's say looking back 30 or 40 years to my young days as an academic, some of the most dysfunctional human beings I've ever known have been Oxford Jack in Emmett's and some of the most highly functional loving, shrewd, sensitive people I've ever met left school of 14. So that I have no academic snobbery whatever. Wisdom and knowledge are not the same thing.

Absolutely, absolutely. But yes, super stuff. People want to know the sort of people who are in suits as well outside of the people you've specifically met.

Mario in Croatia says what do you think about another big British giant and the literary scene J.K. Chesterton in his work? Oh yes, I haven't read everything of Chesterton's but obviously he's a great novelist and very funny and quirky and his great book *The Everlasting Man* and other things like that were attempts 100 or so years ago to explore the world in ways that at the end of the 19th and 20th century people just weren't doing. Obviously he comes from a very traditional Roman Catholic perspective and was kind of exuberant in his delight at being able to say the opposite of what everyone was expecting. I think sometimes he ever did that, it was just his personality.

I'm not an expert on him but I have always enjoyed reading him and he's one of those figures like Lewis himself to whom I go back from time to time. And like Lewis where you can read some of the things they were writing 18, 90 years ago and think gosh that makes perfect sense today. They're so much to it.

Yes, of course in a sense the human condition hasn't changed. In other sense it has things moved on but yes the great thinkers, it's why Plato and Aristotle is still important today. The great thinkers put their fingers on key things about being human which don't change that much and if they're using wonderful imagery to do that like Lewis's stories or indeed Tolkien then we can relate from all sorts of points of view, lots of ways in.

The writer more recently departed that someone wants to ask about and this is Ryan in Nebraska saying, "Dr. Wright's emphasis on the kingdom shares many points of contact with some of the spiritual formation teachings of Dallas Willard. He is right familiar with Willard and if so what are his thoughts? What authors does he find to be most insightful on the topic specifically of spiritual growth?" Yes it's interesting I have tried to read Dallas Willard and I suspect precisely because he and I are really quite close.

It's a funny thing I found it with some other writers as well that when somebody is saying similar things to me I want to edit it. I want to sort of fiddle around with it and say, "Well could we move this fiddle over here?" and surely we're now going to need a section on such and such and that's not a good way to receive a book. So I have tried to read Willard and certainly I have a lot of friends who have told me exactly this and indeed

when I was at that Missy of Alliance conference to my astonishment they presented me with something called the Dallas Willard Award for my work.

I wish I was very proud of and have up on a mantelpiece somewhere. So yes I accept that but sadly I haven't actually made great inroads. So in terms of spiritual growth and development I find two quite different sorts of sources.

One the Bible itself especially the Psalms is simply there all the time and constantly refreshing and two poetry and especially I'm thinking of some of the great English Christian poets like George Herbert or John Dunn. Some of the more recent ones as well, Mandy Hopkins and so on and I find that when I go to them there's a sort of sense of, "Ah yes of course thank you for putting it like that. I'd forgotten and I need that." And it switches on the sort of the imaginative element.

Of course and that is vital. I mean so much in our contemporary culture has treated imagination, music, metaphor, etc. as a dispensable bit of decoration around the edge whereas I passionately believe that is one of the highways to the very centre.

Now in terms of personality I would say that I'm an ENFGA and the F is reasonably strong but for those who may not know this is Myers Briggs language and if you don't know what he means never mind. But whereas of course people who read my academic works perceive me as a thinker rather than an intuitive feeler but for me the intuitive remains enormously important hence music as well. Absolutely and one more if you'll indulge us Michael also in California says if you could have dinner with any person from the 20th century whom would you choose and why? It's one of those classic sort of dinner party questions isn't it? Oh absolutely absolutely.

It's a funny thing. My oldest son who's a historian edits a history journal, the journal of modern French history and they did a feature on him in a recent issue and they asked him these rapid fire questions and one of the questions was if you could go back to a particular point and meet somebody at what would it be and he unhesitatingly said it would be in early 1940 in Normandy so that he could walk into captivity with his grandfather. My father.

My father was captured at the age of 19 and spent five years as a POW and my son as a modern historian has tuned into that because when you said that question my reaction was I would love to go and spend a day with my grandfather actually my mother's father who was an Archdeacon in Royal Northumberland and had been around the Church of England and was brother in law of an Archbishop and had cousins who had masters and goodness knows what and I just love to find out from him what life was really like in the 30s and so on and what the key issues for the Church were. In terms of public figures it might not be very good because we probably don't speak the same language but my great musical hero from early 20th century is a surveillance Spanish composer but I suspect he'd be far too busy you know out in the dark woods north of Helsinki dreaming

up some wonderful whatever. Well at least you can appreciate the music he did create.

Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh yes.

This is the Ask Anti-Write Anything podcast brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Write Online. Now that's the place where you can find all of Tom's online theology courses taught in video format. Now if you've been around the Church you probably know the Lord's Prayer, chances are you've got it memorized but have you really thought about the prayer and why Jesus gave it as a model for talking to God.

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Let's talk about your own churchmanship. Gavin in Salt Lake City says what keeps you in the Anglican tradition? After all these years Tom. You're still an Anglican.

That feels like saying why are you still wearing the same skin? Isn't it wearing out now? And the answer is yeah it actually is but it's still my skin. I mean I was born and bred and brought and bred an Anglican and parents and family on both sides of the family all Anglicans, lots of clergy, lots of active lay folk. My sort of deep DNA folk memory is of reasonably good middle-day Anglican things and certainly not Anglican Catholics, certainly not evangelical.

Simply people who were reading their Bible saying their prayers, singing their hymns and thinking now. There's all Mr. Jones down the road who needs some help with such and such or now that we got some spare time should we be doing meals on wheels. In other words people just quietly being kingdom people in their communities and though for myself I prefer styles of worship a bit more vibrant in various ways than what I grew up with.

The basic Anglican liturgy is Bible, Bible and Bible. I mean you have older New Testament readings which is really really important. If you just have one you forget that these readings are not abstract things they're a narrative.

How do you prepare for them and how do you thank God for those readings? Why? By singing more bits of Bible or canticles close up like the tedium particularly the Psalms. So the most common or garden Anglican worship has Psalms, Bible readings and canticles most of which are biblical themselves. And then when you turn to prayer you are coming into God's presence as somebody who has been living in that story again.

I think that I sort of took that for granted growing up. When I move around in other

church circles I find sometimes there are some bits of that missing. I mean why now have we got to the point where a large swathe of contemporary Christians don't use the Psalms at all? That's never happened before in the history of the church.

It's very dangerous. I think there's something of a movement. We'll probably address this a bit when we talk in another podcast about the church generally and ecclesiology and so on.

But I think there is a bit of a movement in churches that have gone very informal, contemporary sort of sense back towards something that's more structured. I think that's so now. I think that's so because I was in Willow Creek in Chicago a few years ago and somebody said to me there you realize this has now been going for a generation and we're having to start to think about continuity and liturgy to which I said I come from a church that has so much continuity and liturgy at hurts and we could do it a bit of what you've got.

So could we do a deal on this? Do you find yourself at home in either setting whether it be a fairly exuberant praise, guitars, drums or quite a formal set liturgy type of call for even song? I would like the best of both. I love Corleven song. I've lived with that system for a long time and I'm aware that it can go stale and that it can become just a formality.

But because of the actual content it always has a capacity to regenerate itself. The danger with the informal liturgy is that actually you rotate around the same ten songs. It's quite extraordinary you go to the other side of the world and they're seeing the exact same stuff they were in the charismatic fellowship down the road and think well we do a bit better than that.

I worry about my grandchildren growing up not knowing the great hymns from Wesley and Watts and so on that have sustained some of us throughout our lives. And so it is partly the liturgy which is central to being an Anglican but it's also the sense that Anglicanism at its best doesn't say we are the only pebbles on the beach. It says we are kind of sitting in the middle here and if we can help with everything else.

One of my favourite moments when I was Bishop of Durham was working on a big project where I introduced the local Roman Catholic Bishop to the leader of the local house church movement. And I remember thinking I think this is my job actually to make this sort of connection. Making introductions.

You've never been seriously tempted to jump ship. No, my second year I think as an undergraduate at Oxford, the ones who fiery preachers I heard in the Christian Union who were urging us to get out of our corrupt structures and something different and the Lord is doing a new thing etc. And the frustrating thing for me is that I remember feeling that as a very strong pool and I do not now know what it was that stopped me from doing it.

But it was the sort of debate between John Stott and Martin Wood James. That's absolutely right. And it was in the backwash of that.

I simply don't know but because there were plenty of Anglicans who would say well at least it's the best boat to fish from and I never really liked that as an argument. It was a pragmatism of him still. OK, time for one more.

Samuel who's a student at Copenhagen University says dear Professor Wright, have you ever struggled with a suspicion towards your own faith thinking I probably just believe in this because I've already betted so much of my life meaning and identity on this horse. If so, how do you deal with that? Yeah, that has never troubled me because I know so many people from similar backgrounds to me who went and have stayed right away from the faith. I mean when I was at school a lot of the boys that I was with at a single-sex school had church-going parents.

There was chapel day by day, week by week at school and most of the people that I knew were going right away from it. So I was never tempted to think, oh I only believe this because it's what we do here. I was one of the odd ones who actually did do that.

Yeah, yeah. But and by the same token I have lots and lots of good Christian friends who have come into the Christian faith from right outside as having done with the student yesterday who was describing coming into the faith from a totally non-church background sort of mid-20s. And so it happens both ways.

So I don't worry too much about that. I think of course there are lots of bits and pieces of the faith as I have received it which are as I have received it. And when you go to other parts of the world and other traditions you think, oh that's how they do this my goodness you know.

And why are they doing that? And no doubt they would think that in my church as well. And that's when you just learn to lighten up and think, right, this is the situation. I sometimes get this myself, you know, in a sense I'm in a different way involved in Christian ministry and the broadcasting world.

And so people do challenge me sometimes, especially the atheists and agnostics who listen to my other show, say well look you're sort of invested in it just in it. So of course you're going to always be biased to sort of see the arguments for God and you know to see that there is evidence for this and so on. And in a way I can't deny it, of course I'm invested.

None of us come to these things with a totally neutral point of view. That's the implicit lie underneath the implication of the question as it were. It is that every day you should start with a blank slate and now I'm going to believe it today.

It's a very post-modern approach to life by the way. I'm going to invent myself again

today, what shall I do? I mean nobody in the legal profession would say am I going to think like a lawyer today? No, of course you are, you've learned how to do it, you're doing it, you've got this job, that might go dead on you and there are some people, some clergy, some bishops whose faith for whatever reason does go dead and then there is a problem because is this a dark night at the soul that I have to work through or have I actually totally lost the plot and it's going to be like that forever and I'm one of those odd people that I wonder about, I do the wrong thing, I think the wrong thing, I say the wrong thing and I come back and I say sorry and we start again and God is amazingly gracious and I never really remember a time of not being aware of the presence of God. So it's not been a case of do I really believe this, it's like well do I breathe? Yes I do, it's fascinating, thank you so much for spending a bit of time, answering questions on yourself, always the easiest thing to do.

Strange, yes, yes. Anyway I appreciate that, if you've got more questions perhaps in a future podcast we'll ask a few more of Tom's personal questions, see what we can dig out from the past but it's been great to have you again for this week's podcast, don't forget you can send your questions in as well, askntwrite.com is the place to go, do tell other people about the podcast as well, do rate and review us and we look forward to seeing you again next time. Thank you.

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